DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 667 TM 030 295

AUTHOR Dowd, Alicia C.
TITLE Doing Qualitative Research without a Disciplinary Framework.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Research; *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; Higher Education; *Intellectual Disciplines; Models; *Qualitative Research; *Researchers; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

In 1998, the researcher participated in a graduate-level interpretive methods class as a teaching assistant. This paper considers several aspects of the approach used in this class to teach interpretive research methods. These approaches include: (1) the introduction of five different research traditions recognized as qualitative; (2) the assignment of a class research project; and (3) the absence of either a disciplinary perspective or background readings to guide the research project. The paper is informed by observations in class, conversations with students and other instructors, and the review of student research papers. The implications for teaching qualitative methods are discussed. The study suggests that when a novice researcher proceeds without a grounding in a relevant discipline or theoretical perspective, she may have difficulty bounding the case under study. In the absence of theory, novice researchers need to be able to rely on their personal response to their field experiences and on careful examination of those responses in order to focus their attention on arguments they care about. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 435 667

# Doing Qualitative Research Without a Disciplinary Framework

Presented at the
American Educational Research Association
Annual Meeting
April 19-23, 1999

*as part of the*
*Interactive Symposium*
Learning to Become Qualitative Researchers:
Issues Theoretical and Performative

Alicia C. Dowd, Ph.D.
Research Associate
Department of Education
Cornell University
415 Kennedy Hall
Cornell University
607 255-7755
ad19@cornell.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TM030295

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Alicia Dowd
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

**Doing Qualitative Research Without a Disciplinary Framework**

In the Spring of 1998, I participated in a graduate-level interpretive methods class as a teaching assistant. In this paper, I consider several aspects of the approach used in this class to teach interpretive research methods. These approaches include (a) the introduction of five different research traditions recognized as qualitative; (b) the assignment of a class research project; and (c) the absence of either a disciplinary perspective or background readings to guide the research project. My comments are informed by observations in class, conversations with students and the other course instructors, and the review of student research papers, but they are certainly not the result of a systematic study. The questions I raise are salient to me as a novice qualitative researcher and a novice teacher of research methods. I draw on the work of students in the class to inform my impressions and questions, and offer a few critiques of their work. These comments are meant to focus on the limitations inherent in attempting to learn complex research approaches in the short space of a semester, not to assess the work of the individuals who completed the projects. My comments are intended to consider ways to take such limitations into account when designing instruction in interpretive research methods.

After providing brief background information about the class and the project, I summarize the results of the student research projects. Then I focus on the approaches students took to present their findings. I hypothesize that in the absence of background knowledge and theories of an academic discipline relevant to the research project, the process of building models to represent findings lacks meaning. Novice researchers, therefore, can make a stronger case for their findings by making arguments that explicitly

take account of strongly felt personal responses to field experiences. Research traditions that employ the use of highly structured analytical processes de-emphasize those personal responses, which might be called "naturalistic generalizations" (Stake, 1995; Stake & Trumbull, 1982; Trumbull, 1998). As a result, students have difficulty constructing a compelling narrative, a task which is central to data analysis in many qualitative research traditions (Creswell, 1998).

**Background**

The following features of the class are relevant to the discussion below.

(a) The text used in the class was John W. Creswell's (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions.* The text introduces five traditions of qualitative research: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography.

(b) The class was assigned a research project, though students had latitude in determining the particular focus on their work and in designing their research methods by choosing among the traditions presented in text. The project addressed an administrative concern at the institution regarding the perceived quality and status of the institution among students, their parents, and alumni. The class set out to gain an understanding of the nature of the undergraduate academic experience at the institution.

(c) No readings were assigned concerning approaches to assessing quality in higher education or providing a history of the purpose and traditions of higher education in the U. S. In addition, disciplinary perspectives that are often applied to evaluate higher

education (e.g. sociology, economics, history, psychology) were not discussed for the purpose of framing the research question.

(d) Students were encouraged to work in groups. The class divided into four groups, representing each of the traditions, except ethnography. These four groups then pursued the common research focus using the techniques described in the textbook and in other literature related to their chosen methods. Interviews, focus groups, observations, and document reviews were among the strategies used to address the question.

**Findings of the Research Projects**

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the student research projects. Column 2 shows the expected outcome of studies conducted in the different qualitative traditions as described by Creswell in his text. Column 3 indicates the sample selection process used by each student (the two biographers worked independently) or group of students. Column 4 summarizes the findings of each project, while Column 5 indicates the form in which results were presented. The information in Columns 3 and 4 will be discussed in this section as I consider the influence of the selection processes on the findings. The information in Column 5 will be elaborated on in the next section when I discuss the difficulties posed in developing findings without a theoretical perspective.

Each of the research projects focused on some version of the question "What does it mean [for the students in the sample] to experience education [at that institution]?" The findings varied considerably with sample selection. The most striking differences in the findings depended on whether the students in the sample were studying in liberal arts or applied fields. The two biographies focused on two individual liberal arts students, the

Table 1 Summary of Student Research Projects

| 1. Group | 2. Expected Outcome (Creswell) | 3. Sample Selection | 4. Findings | 5. Form of Presentation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biography #1 | tell and inscribe stories of others (p. 48) | personal acquaintance, rare case, student in liberal arts college | freedom to design curriculum allows student to become "citizen of the world" through language learning | narrative |
| Biography #2 | tell and inscribe stories of others (p. 48) | personal acquaintance, rare case, student in liberal arts college | value of different forms of education varies as a person changes and comes to understand self and the world | narrative |
| Case Study | exploration of a "bounded system" (p. 61) | exemplary case, students in college with relatively high satisfaction ratings | small college within a large university provides community, experiential learning, and liberal learning | visual model, parts related linearly |
| Phenomenol-ogy | identify essential invariant structure of an experience (p. 55) | students associated with university public service center | quality characterized by faculty, courses, students, and activities | statement of essence of experience, plus three broad categories linearly related |
| Grounded Theory | a theory: an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon (p. 56) | exemplary case, students in college with relatively high satisfaction ratings | preprofessional curriculum provides a "greased chute" to a successful career | visual model, parts related hierarchically |

grounded theory project focused on students in a preprofessional program, and the other two projects focused on students in a college with a predominantly applied social sciences curriculum, but which described its programs as providing "liberal learning." Table 1 lists the class projects, going down the table, from the one (Biography #1) whose findings most clearly characterized education at the university in terms traditionally associated with the liberal arts to the one (Grounded Theory) that characterized education as preparation for a career.

Biography #1 described the values and goals of a woman in the liberal arts college of the university. This woman, called Jiawen in the study, felt that though in modern racial terms she would be classified as Caucasian, she was, in fact, Chinese in her way of being and her outlook on the world. This student was enrolled in a program that let her design her own curriculum. She chose to study Chinese language and literature, as well as other languages, with the goal of becoming a "citizen of the world." The author of this study provides an image of his subject that evokes the classical notion of the Peripatetic scholar, the follower of Aristotle who engages in scholarly discourse while walking. Jiawen, he tells us, spent one hour a day walking on the campus to think about the day. "Every time I walk, I feel a different part of the scenery, and I also find a new aspect of my life," Jiawen says. Though Jiawen's walks are solitary and her focus is on modern languages and literature, not ancient Greek and Latin, she seems to embody the classical ideal of scholarship in the liberal arts tradition. Through study of great works of civilization she hopes to prepare herself for a leadership role, not just in a small city-state, but in global affairs.

The second biography also focuses on a liberal arts student, called John by the author. John is motivated by an interest in politics and social issues to be active in student affairs and to volunteer in a social services organization. These activities provide opportunities for experiential learning that he values greatly. However, his intellectual goals, as presented to us by the author, are also firmly rooted in the liberal arts tradition, with a focus on critical thinking, self-determination, and developing an understanding of the complexity of the world and of human relations. The author's narrative revolves around John's change and growth over his four years as a college student. The narrative makes clear that John valued different aspects of the liberal arts curriculum as he matured. His intellectual and personal growth had a unique trajectory, and the one aspect of the college's requirements that seem important as we learn about the experiences of this one student is that they allowed for individuals to determine their own path within the college.

Following from the sample selection of two individuals who were liberal arts students, the two biographies characterized educational experiences in terms associated with the liberal arts tradition. The findings of the Case Study and Phenomenology groups had similar elements, with discussions of critical thinking and personal development, but these were situated within analyses that focused on the importance of the collegiate community. This emphasis on community distinguishes their findings from the liberal arts tradition, which is much more individualistic.

The Case Study group chose to include in their sample students who were enrolled in a particular college of the university. This college, which was originally founded as a college of home economics, had received higher satisfaction ratings on

surveys sent to alumni and student parents than had other colleges. The Phenomenology group used a snowball sampling design, beginning with the involvement of students who were volunteers at the university's public service center. Many of these students were in the same college as those in the Case Study sample.

The former college of home economics had evolved to a college with a number of different degree programs in applied social science fields, such as consumer economics, policy analysis, textile design, and human development. Following from the sample selection of students in this college, the findings of the Case Study and Phenomenology groups highlighted experiential and applied learning, such as internships and research projects, as important aspects of the collegiate experience. They focused also on interactions between students, and between students and faculty and staff, to explore the meaning and value of community. The existence of a caring community was discussed as an important resource for the personal development of students. Career development was often closely allied with personal development in their analyses, but career preparation was not identified as the defining characteristic of the collegiate experience.

The Grounded Theory project also focused on a college at the university that had fared well on responses to surveys assessing alumni and parent satisfaction with the institution. This college has a narrowly structured curriculum with many requirements and few electives. Students proceed through their four years as a cohort taking the prescribed sequence of classes, which are also in applied social science fields. Graduates from this college often pursue professional careers in business and law. Following from the sample selection of students engaged in a narrowly structured preprofessional program, the Grounded Theory findings emphasized the benefit of entering and leaving

college with clearly defined career goals. The authors developed an encompassing descriptive phrase, to characterize the educational experience in that particular school. The slogan "If you know what you want, we can give you the edge to succeed" provided a unifying theme for the discussion of the benefit of a clearly defined curriculum, readily available and effective career counseling, and the advantages to the student of belonging to a peer group with similar expectations and goals. The college was described as providing a "greased chute" to a career. As in the Case Study and Phenomenology findings, internships and a supportive collegial atmosphere were identified as important aspects of the student experience, but little emphasis was given to personal and intellectual development.

Despite the fact that the different research groups were working on projects with a common genesis and purpose and had formulated their research questions in similar ways, the researchers did not take significant account of each others' evolving hypotheses and findings in writing their reports. Further attention to the missions and histories of the different colleges would have contributed to the characterization of the experiences of students in these different educational environments. The researchers could have attempted to accommodate the different emphases of the findings as a way to search for discrepant evidence, but such explorations were conducted only as part of the class discussion.

The class discussion revolved around the hypothesis that students with clear career goals who choose their academic program as a clear route to reach those goals would perceive that the college was meeting their needs. We did not arrive at a discussion of the responsibility of an institution to define the purpose and quality of

education in its various programs. Nor did we consider the institution's ability to do this effectively as a source of student and parent satisfaction. This is not surprising, because students identified specific parts of the university in which to conduct their analyses and focused their efforts on understanding the experiences of students in their own samples. They did not attempt to characterize the nature of education at the university as a whole. Such a goal would have been warranted, given that the initial interest in the research project issued from an office with responsibilities for university-wide planning. The time limits of a semester's project and the demands of becoming familiar with complex research traditions and practices perhaps constrained students' abilities to locate their analyses within a broader consideration of the purposes of higher education. The fact that students were not necessarily familiar with theoretical models that seek to explain these purposes created a second type of constraint. In the next section, I consider the difficulties of undertaking a research project on a topic that one has not encountered as an subject of academic inquiry.

**Analysis and Presentation**

As Denzin (1989) has written, "Interpretation is the process of setting forth the meaning of an event or experience." Creswell's text, with its discussion and illustration of the methods of analysis in the five traditions, demonstrates that the ways of "setting forth" are numerous and diverse. In Creswell's summary in Table 8.2 of "Data Analysis and Representation by Research Traditions," all but one of the five traditions are indicated as relying on narration for "representing" and "visualizing" the data analysis. The exception is grounded theory, which relies on visual models and the presentation of propositions. The development of effective narratives depends on the capacity to clearly

identify the subject of the narrative and to situate oneself as the author in relation to that subject. This problem can be generalized to the need in all writing to present a consistent point of view (or at least to only allow shifts in point of view knowingly).

Point of view takes on a special challenge in qualitative research as the author must "inscribe" the narratives of participants in a study. Creswell (p.48) cites Denzin to define the meaning of "inscribe," doing so in a way that highlights the multiple points of view that are the foundation of the interpretive report. He notes, "We create the persons we write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices." Elsewhere, Taylor (1982) has explored the complexity of this concept in a discussion of "intersubjective reality." Taylor's more thorough treatment of this notion bore the task of refuting the application of social science research approaches that aimed to define objective reality through the use of scientific methods. Based on my initial experiences as a researcher and a teacher of qualitative methods, I think that the more structured modes of data analysis inhibit a novice researcher's ability to confidently develop a focused narrative.

I include studies in the traditions of grounded theory and phenomenology as those that rely on structured modes of data analysis. Clearly, my arguments can only take the form of hypotheses, given that my own work has taken the form of case studies, and my immediate experience of grounded theory and phenomenology research is limited to my experience in the class that is the subject of this discussion. The experiences of the three students who made up our Phenomenology group are the ones that strongly inform my opinion.

The students in the Phenomenology group set out confidently and their reports in the early stages were well written, well organized, and insightful. About two-thirds of the way through the semester, their data analysis had been completed and showed painstaking care. Seven tables showed the care the group had taken in formulating meanings of significant statements, creating clusters of common themes, and writing exhaustive descriptions of "quality" and "non-quality" educational experiences. The work appeared to be of textbook quality. Yet, their frustration began to show.

It seemed to me that the tightly structured data analysis process had driven away the sense of purpose the group had taken into the project. They could no longer identify their own place in the narrative they now needed to write about their explorations. Creswell (p. 52) indicates that data analysis using phenomenological approaches relies on intuition and imagination, but, for this group, that aspect of the tradition was lost. The Nobel Prize winning scientist Barbara McClintock is reported to have said, "Things are much more marvelous than the scientific method allows us to conceive" (cited in Keller, 1983, p. 203). For novice researchers in the social sciences, I think this is an important message. The use of structured methods of data analysis are valuable because they call on the researcher to turn her impressions around and examine them many times. They do not certify the truth of an interpretation. Their purpose is to require the author to build a structure from which she can confidently assert her arguments. I think this point is easily lost on newcomers to qualitative methods who, under the pressure of dissertation deadlines and the desire to "get it right," may expect the results of their data analysis to provide "the" answer.

A different way of thinking about the purpose of research is to find the "crux" of an event or experience. I take this use of the term from an essay by Cornell professor Patricia Carden. In *Teaching Prose* (1984) Carden observed:

> Finding a crux for argument is a way both to engage the subject of discussion in searching analysis and to explore possibilities for writing. The best argumentative papers are not just expressions of a position; they seek to unravel, solve, resolve, and interpret. An argument that contains nothing problematic is not a genuine argument.

In talking with students in the class about their research, I tended to discuss the strengths and weakness of their arguments and to note whether I found their evidence for those arguments convincing. This approach is consistent with Stake's (1995, p. 86) use of the term "assertions" to refer to "the researcher's propositional arguments." Drawing on earlier work with Deborah Trumbull (cited in Stake, p. 85), he contrasts these with "naturalistic generalizations," which he defines as "conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life's affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves." Both naturalistic and propositional generalizations should be presented by an author in order to enable readers to understand and care about a researcher's presentation of a case. The same can be said of researchers, particularly novice researchers working without explicit reference to theoretical arguments. They need to be able to draw on their naturalistic generalizations in order to locate themselves within the narrative presentation of their findings.

Veteran researchers may be able to gain sustenance more easily from the development of propositional arguments, because these may be developed in response to ongoing debates in a discipline and may take the form of models intended to contribute to understandings of existing theories. For the most part, the students in our class did not call on relevant theories or prior research to inform their understandings of their research. This is understandable because it was not required or even expected of them as part of the class project. A few students were familiar with relevant theories from educational psychology and sociology and drew on these tentatively. However, none of the studies were firmly situated to address a theoretical perspective.

For this reason, when the groups turned to model building, their models were broadly framed and served more as an outline of points to be discussed than as a framework for exploring tensions raised by the analysis and pursued in search of the "crux" of the experience under study. The model resulting from the case study was linear and did not have a point of tension around which the discussion revolved. The phenomenologists dutifully reported the statement of the essence of the experience they had studied, but did not discuss the meaning of these essences in their text. Instead, they identified three broad categories in which to group their observations and discussed them in serial order.

The Grounded Theory group did identify a "crux," which they called a slogan. Interestingly though, this slogan did not evolve from the explicit data analysis steps indicated by the tradition they were working within. It was created in a brainstorming session where each researcher in the group "said what came to mind" when she thought about the experiences of the students in the sample (Bokaer-Smith, Edstrom, LaMar, &

Moodie, 1998, p. 24). The process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was not discussed in relation to the creation of the slogan (and, in fact, was entirely relegated to the researchers' audit trails). Unlike the phenomenologists, the grounded theorists did not allow the structured data analysis techniques to crowd out their naturalistic generalizations. As a result, however, their model was less central to their analysis than it might have been. The visual model was hierarchically related with major and minor themes and linking concepts, but the text addressed these points in a much more linear fashion. (In part, this was no doubt related to the fact that in writing the group report individual members of the group took primary responsibility for one particular section.)

Neither of the biographers attempted a visual model. In its text, Biography #1 assumed a journalistic style and offered a series of observations under subheadings that were not integrated as a model or by an overarching propositional argument. The author of Biography #2 used a chronological framework in which to explore the crux of her relationship with the subject of her study, to understand what he revealed about himself and to learn from him what she could about herself. The chronological narration looped back and forth between the present and the past as the author developed an understanding of John's process of identity development and of her own assumptions about the nature and value of a college education. Biography #2 most successfully presented an integrated narrative and explicitly explored her initial and emerging hypotheses when presenting her arguments. This stemmed from the author's recognition that she must evaluate her own values and experiences in order to understand those of her subject. Though the biographical research tradition may be more conducive to the development of a narrative,

I believe the strength of Biography #2 resulted more from the author's willingness and ability to locate herself in relation to her subject and her narrative than from advantages of the biographical method.

**Implications for Teaching Qualitative Methods**

The statistician G. E. P. Box has observed, "All models are wrong, but some are useful" (Chatfield, 1988, p. 15). A number of models from across the social science disciplines have been employed to understand the experiences and choices of college students. These include the human capital model from economics, models of identity and self-concept from psychology, and screening and credentialism models from sociology. These models are created as part of a conversation with other researchers, with the aim of encapsulating the findings and arguments of those who have studied the same phenomena. Just as the process of theoretical modeling focuses attention on factors considered most relevant and important, it leaves out other information that is relegated outside the boundary of the model. When researchers work within theoretical frameworks they can narrow their arguments, rely on prior understandings to exclude aspects of the analysis, and focus on a specific audience for their arguments. When a novice researcher proceeds without a grounding in a relevant discipline or theoretical perspective, she may have difficulty bounding the case under study. In the absence of theory, novice researchers need to be able to rely on their personal responses to their field experiences and on careful examinations of those responses in order to focus their attention on arguments they care about.

This analysis has two implications for teaching qualitative methods. First, students should be encouraged to identify and build on their own impressions and intuitions, even as they use highly structured data analysis techniques, in order to enable them to focus on developing arguments and supporting those arguments with relevant data. In particular, the demands of data coding and analysis in the grounded theory and phenomenology traditions appear to foster a sense that the researcher must provide a technical proof of the findings, rather than an explication of an interpretive framework. Second, though there are benefits to having a common class project (during class discussions, for example), these may be outweighed by the benefits students might enjoy by being able to choose a topic of their own in which they have a theoretical grounding. This is particularly true if, given the pressures of academic schedules, students do not take significant account of findings by other students that might enrich their own observations.

Bibliography

Bokaer-Smith, J., Edstrom, K., LaMar, Y., & Moodie, B. (1998). If You Know What You Want, We Will Give You the Edge to Succeed: ILR Students' Experience of Their Education . Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

Carden, P. (1984). Designing a Course. In F. V. Bogel & K. K. Gottschalk (Eds.), Teaching Prose . New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Chatfield, C. (1988). Problem Solving: A Statistician's Guide. London: Chapman and Hall.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). Interpretive Interactionism. (Vol. 16). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Keller, E. F. (1983). A Feeling for the Organism. New York: WH Freeman and Company.

Stake, R. E. (1995). The Art of Case Study Research. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Stake, R. E., & Trumbull, D. J. (1982). Naturalistic Research Paradigms. Review Journal of Philosophy and Social Science, 7(1), 1-12.

Taylor, C. (1982). Interpretation and the Sciences of Man. In E. Bredo & W. Feinberg (Eds.), Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research . Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Trumbull, D. (1998). Naturalistic Generalizations: We Think What We Are. Paper presented at the Conference in Honor of Robert Stake's Retirement, University of Illinois-UC.